Best Treaty; The Empire Strikes Out - New York Times

April 18, 1999

Best Treaty; The Empire Strikes Out

By FAREED ZAKARIA

International treaties are generally agreements between the strong and the weak

in which the latter agrees to do what the former asks. As the ancient historian

Thucydides put it, ''The strong do what they can; the weak do what they must.''

But some treaties also mark the birth of whole new concepts of international

relations.

In 1648, after three decades of bloody warfare and three years of negotiation,

two such documents were signed in northwest Germany. Together, they constituted

the Peace of Westphalia, probably the most important treaty of the millennium.

It ushered in the modern state system that governs our world -- the very system

that is now, 350 years later, being undermined by transnational forces like the

euro, the Internet and Amnesty International.

The Peace of Westphalia brought an end to the Thirty Years' War, the deadliest

conflict in history until then, in which perhaps 10 million people died. The war

began when Protestant German princes revolted against Ferdinand II, their

nominal sovereign and head of the Holy Roman Empire, a confederation of mostly

German-speaking principalities. Ferdinand, the Hapsburg Emperor, championed the

Counter-Reformation, which sought to restore Catholic power in Europe.

Protestant Sweden allied with the German princes against him; so did Catholic

France. Voil, Europe had a full-scale war. While France's move showed that canny

diplomacy knows no god, it was religion that made the Thirty Years' War so

important. Compromise was impossible. Either the Pope was Christ's vicar on

earth or he wasn't. Protestants were heretics or heroes. You couldn't split the

difference.

At war's end, the big losers were the Hapsburgs of Austria, who reigned over the

Holy Roman Empire; much of the treaty was devoted to parceling out their land to

the winners, the unholy alliance led by France and Sweden. But the treaty had

larger consequences. It ended the idea that Europe was a single Christian

empire, governed spiritually by the Pope and temporally by the Holy Roman

Emperor. The treaty also gingerly extended the idea of religious tolerance. The

rights of private worship, liberty of conscience and emigration were explicitly

granted to those outside Hapsburg domains. Moreover, the rulers of various

principalities were allowed to choose the official religion of their lands, a

power the Pope and the Emperor had bitterly refused to grant. Westphalia marked

the end of a world of universal values and the rise of national interests in its

place. It defrocked priests and empowered princes, and it made the state the

motor of history.

Since Westphalia, there have been plenty of challenges to the state; think of

the power of the Hudson's Bay Company, the East India Company or of private

bankers like the Rothschilds and Morgans. Still, the nation-state has had a good

run. Only now is it evolving into something more complex. The modern national

leader must navigate through such constraints as interest rates, advocacy groups

and the international media. Meanwhile, the world has witnessed the end of the

ideological conflict that has been this century's religious war. There is one

ideology left standing, liberal democratic capitalism, and one institution with

universal reach, the United States. Not since the waning of Catholic power in

the 17th century has one entity spread its values so widely. If the past is any

guide, America's primacy will provoke growing resistance. The 21st century may

well bring a struggle between yet another universal system of values and

national power.

Managing editor of Foreign Affairs and a contributing editor at Newsweek

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company Home Privacy Policy Search

Corrections XML Help Contact Us Work for Us Back to Top